

## British government calls for caution against COVID-19 variants as restrictions lift and businesses reopen

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People visit a pub in Manchester as pubs, cafes and restaurants in England reopen indoors under the latest easing of the coronavirus lockdown.

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People across much of Britain enjoyed a pint in the pub, hugged their friends and watched a film in a movie theatre for the first time in months on Monday after the government dramatically eased lockdown restrictions. But the new-found freedom has been tempered by fears that a surge in cases of a coronavirus variant could force the government to scrap further easing.

“We must be humble in the face of this virus,” Health Secretary Matt Hancock told the House of Commons. “We must be alert to new variants that can jeopardize the progress we have made.”

Britain has seen a spike in cases of the variant first associated with India, but that didn’t stop the government from going ahead with lifting many lockdown rules in England on Monday. The measures included allowing pubs and restaurants to resume indoor service and reopening movie theatres, museums, galleries and sports stadiums to up to 10,000 fans. Scotland and Wales have largely followed suit and Northern Ireland will take similar steps later this month.

“It’s great,” said Adam Robertson as he watched his daughter and partner play video games at the Pier Family Entertainment arcade in Hunstanton, a seaside resort in eastern England. “We came for the weekend and stayed an extra day [on Monday] just so we could come here. I thought it would be more crowded but maybe some people are still a bit worried.”

Across town, Carrie Hukin welcomed the first diners to Joe’s Family Restaurant, which had been closed since last November. “I’m more than happy to be back at work,” Ms. Hukin said as she bustled between tables during the lunch hour. “It’s wonderful to see people back.”

The enthusiasm carried over to London, where Mayor Sadiq Khan launched a campaign called Let’s Do London in an attempt to lure visitors to the capital. “We have begun the biggest domestic tourism campaign London has ever seen, encouraging Londoners to come back to the West End and encouraging those across the country, who may be a bit crestfallen that they cannot go on their international holidays: Don’t worry, everything you need is in London,” he told reporters on Monday.

The celebratory mood had a catch, though, as public-health officials announced that the number of cases of a variant first associated with India, known as B.1.617.2, had doubled in the past week to 2,323. Most of the cases have been clustered in the Manchester area, as well as around Glasgow and in northeastern Scotland, but officials said the variant has been found in 86 of England’s 343 local authorities. Scientists expect that B.1.617.2 will soon become the dominant mutation of COVID-19 in Britain.

The rapid rise in cases has prompted the government to reconsider its management of the pandemic. Prime Minister Boris Johnson had been hoping to remove all remaining lockdown restrictions, including face-mask rules, on June 21. But those plans are in jeopardy as public-health officials scramble to contain the spread of the variant.

The government has begun mass testing in Greater Manchester and ramped up its vaccination program by cutting the interval between doses to eight weeks from 12. Immunizations have also been increased among younger age groups in some areas hardest hit by the variant. So far, 36.7 million people across the country have had one dose of vaccine and 20 million have had two.

Scientists have yet to determine just how contagious B.1.617.2 is, but a government committee of experts estimated that it could be up to 50 per cent more transmissible than the variant that currently dominates Britain, known as B.1.1.7. “If B.1.617.2 does have such a large transmission advantage, it is a realistic possibility that progressing with [lockdown easing] would lead to a substantial resurgence of hospitalizations,” said a report last week from the Scientific Pandemic Influenza Group on Modelling.

The group added that even though Britain’s vaccination campaign has reached more than two-thirds of adults, “At this point in the vaccine rollout, there are still too few adults vaccinated to prevent a significant resurgence that ultimately could put unsustainable pressure on the [National Health Service].”

For now the government is taking comfort from figures that show relatively few people with the variant have been admitted to hospital. For example, in the Manchester suburb of Bolton, which has 483 cases, just 19 people have been hospitalized and Mr. Hancock said most of them had not been vaccinated. That was an indication, he added, that vaccines appear to be working against the variant.

Across the country, fewer than 1,000 people are being treated in hospitals for COVID-19. That’s the lowest total since last summer; there were 40,000 hospitalizations at the peak of the pandemic in January. The average number of daily deaths has also dropped to nine from more than 1,500 some days in January.

However, the rate of daily infections has been climbing slightly in recent days after falling below 2,000 recently. On Monday, the government reported 1,979 new cases, up 1 per cent in the past week.

The World Health Organization said on May 10 that the COVID-19 variant first associated with India last year was being classified as a variant of global concern, with some preliminary studies showing that it spreads more easily.

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